

**AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS:**

*Please amend claims 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23 and 35 as follows:*

7. (Amended) A system as claimed in claim 5, wherein

the strip is mounted in an [equalising] equalizing groove which is countersunk in the rear side of the panel and exhibits an exact, predetermined distance from its bottom to the front side of the panel,

the part of the strip projecting behind the adjacent panel engages a corresponding [equalising] equalizing groove which is countersunk in the rear side of the adjacent panel and which exhibits the same exact, predetermined distance from its bottom to the front side of the adjacent panel, and

the strip has at least such a thickness that the rear side of the strip is flush with the rear sides of the panels.

8. (Amended) A system as claimed in claim 7, wherein the strip has such a thickness that it is only partly received in the [equalising] equalizing grooves.

10. (Amended) A system as claimed in claim 9, wherein the mechanical connection between the strip and the panel comprises a gripping edge defined by two recesses in the rear side of the panel, and tongues[,] and lips [or the like] which are bent or punched from the strip and which press against opposite outer sides of the gripping edge.

11. (Amended) A system as claimed in claim 9, wherein the mechanical connection between the strip and the panel comprises a recess in the rear side of the panel, and tongues[,] and lips [or the like] which are bent or punched from the strip and which press against opposing inner sides of the recess.

13. (Amended) A system as claimed in claim 5, wherein the strip is made of a flexible[, preferably] resilient material[, such as sheet aluminum].

17. (Amended) A system as claimed in claim 1, wherein an underlay of floor boards, foam, or felt [or the like] is fixed to the rear sides of the panels.

19. (Amended) A system as claimed in any one of the preceding claims, wherein a sealing means[, such as a sealing compound, a rubber strip or the like,] is provided on the front side of the strip between the locking element and the first edge of the strip panel to seal against the adjacent panel.

23. (Amended) A system for providing a joint between adjacent building panels, comprising:

each of said building panels including a first edge and a second edge such that the first edge of each of said building panels forms a first mechanical connection with the second edge of an adjacent one of the building panels locking the first and second edges of

the building panels to each other in a first direction at right angles to a principal plane of the panels, and

a locking device arranged on a rear side of the building panels forming a second mechanical connection locking the building panels to each other in a second direction parallel to the principal plane and at right angles to the first and second edges, said locking device fitting within a locking groove extending parallel to and spaced apart from the first edge of said building panels, and which locking groove is open at the rear side of the building panels,

the locking device comprising a strip integrated with the second edge of each of said building panels, said strip being provided with a locking element projecting from the strip, such that when two adjacent building panels are joined together, the strip projects from the rear side of the second edge of the panels with its locking element received in the locking groove of an adjacent building panel,

the first and the second mechanical connections both allow mutual displacement of the building panels in a direction of the first and second edges, and

the second mechanical connection enables the locking element to leave the locking groove if the respective building panel is turned about its first edge angularly away from the strip;

wherein the strip is mounted in an equalizing groove which is countersunk in the rear side of each of the building panels and exhibits an exact, predetermined distance from its bottom to the front side of the panel,

the part of the strip projecting behind the adjacent panel engages a corresponding [equalising] equalizing groove which is countersunk in the rear side of the adjacent panel and which exhibits the same exact, predetermined distance from its bottom to the front side of the adjacent panel, and

the strip has at least such a thickness that the rear side of the strip is flush with the rear sides of the panels.

35. (Amended) A system as claimed in claim 31, wherein the strip is made of a same material as a remainder of the building panel, and the strip is integrally formed with the building panel.

Please add the following new claims 41 – 43:

41. (New) The system of claim 13, wherein the strip is made of sheet aluminum.

42. (New) The system of claim 19, wherein the sealing means is a rubber strip.

43. (New) The system of claim 19, wherein the sealing means is a sealing compound.